

Basiana's Pig. A story of murder and redemption from the Solomon Islands.

Tim Flannery, with David Maclaren, Esau Kekeubata, Tyrone Lavery

In 1927, a group of Kwaio men killed 15 heavily armed Europeans and Solomon Islanders who had been sent to Malaita to collect a head tax. In response, the Australian government sent the HMAS Adelaide carrying a militia bent on revenge. When this proved ineffective, the British armed a group of Malaitans who held grudges against the Kwaio.

Over 60 men, women and children were killed on the Kwaio side before Basiana, the organizer of the attack, and six colleagues, gave themselves up and were hanged by the British at Tulagi. These events set off a series of murders and assaults, including the beheading of an Australian in 2003, which continued for 91 years.

I first visited the Kwaio in 1987, at the invitation of the son of a survivor of the massacre days. I surveyed the mammal fauna, and described several previously unknown and endangered mammal species. In 2015 I began working with the Kwaio on a community conservation project aimed at preserving endangered fauna. By early 2018 I had been informed that those participating in the project were no longer safe, and that a reconciliation ceremony between the Europeans and Kwaio was needed if the work was to continue.

This is the story of that reconciliation ceremony, which occurred early July 2018, and of the impact of the Kwaio community conservation projects."

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07/07/18.

Today is the Solomon Islands' 40th Independence Day, and the roads are eerily empty. Tyrone Lavery (scientist on our community conservation project), Ben Speare (videographer), and I learn that Atoifi airstrip has been closed by rain. So we fly to Auki, provincial capital, and hire a truck to drive across the island to Atori, to then take a banana boat to Atoifi. The road is the worst I've ever been on, one continuous struggle of mud, ruts, enormous gouges, rotting bridges, and flooded rivers. Bugged trucks constantly block the road, holding us up while it rains. We pull up at a long line of vehicles stopped before a raging river. The ford necessitates a 90-degree change of direction midstream. Nobody seems game to give it a try until a 3-tonne truck with 4WD braves it. Our turn comes. I get into the tray at the back just in case — so I can leap free if necessary. Halfway across, we stall. The water builds against the vehicle's doors. Then the car re-starts.

Atori is mostly a collection of shacks in a mangrove swamp, used for loading and unloading cargo from trucks to banana boats. We meet Esau Kekeubata — organiser of the reconciliation and key to our conservation initiative. We board a banana boat to Gala Island just near Atoifi. A few hundred metres out Esau has an

idea: the bodies of District Officer Bell and Lilley, victims of the 1927 massacre, lie buried on the small island of Ngongosila, a kilometre or so offshore from Atori. We'll stop there.

Esau seems nervous. This is not Kwaio country; they speak a different language and follow different customs. He talks for a while with two old men before gaining permission for us to step ashore. The island is the size of a few football fields. Among the densely packed buildings are the headstones of Bell and Lilley.

A few minutes after starting off again we leave the protection of the reef. In the dusk a great, rolling swell of the Pacific Ocean tosses our banana boat like it's a dry leaf. We head south westwards, into the teeth of the wind and waves.

The sky darkens, and we approach a narrow channel through a reef and enter a shallow lagoon. Then we reach a tiny inlet through a mangrove forest, barely deep enough for the boat. After a few hundred metres it widens into a lagoon. We have arrived at Gala Island. Up a small slope and I see the outlines of a guesthouse. Inside are David MacLaren, public health researcher who has worked with Esau Kekeubata since the early 1990's, and Esau's son Tommy. A dinner of boiled sweet potato, roast taro and greens awaits us.

As we eat, David, Esau and Tommy seem a little nervous. Esau says that 90% of the community are on side with the reconciliation. David mentions that the only risk comes from individuals who may disagree with the initiative. Later that evening, for the first time, Esau tells me about his past. He was expelled from school in grade two when older boys accidentally broke his arm (the principal was afraid Esau's relatives would demand compensation). He led a life of crime in Western Province before becoming a bank robber in Honiara. He robbed 3 banks (though not convicted) and stole 87 pigs. "When you reach 100, you have to kill a man," he says in pidgin English, in reference to the rules of the Ramo (a Kwaio strongman).

Esau decided to change his ways, but such was his reputation that in 2002 he was invited to hunt and kill the notorious Guadalcanal renegade Harold Keke, who had murdered 50 people, including a Cabinet minister and an Anglican Priest. The Prime Minister had put up a reward — a bounty in the eyes of the Kwaio. Esau declined the mission, but ten Kwaio men accepted. All were killed by Keke's henchmen. Esau later described how he and his male relatives had kidnapped his wife, ambushing her entire village in the night.

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An old man has died in the night, and if the rain ever stops, the people will bury him. They get the chance around midday, and a few hours later we meet the villagers and discuss a marine conservation area they created a year earlier. It covers an area of reef, lagoon and mangrove around Gala Island — maybe a kilometre long and half a kilometre deep. Last month they opened a small part of the lagoon for a day, in order to cater for a funeral and took 1,900 fish — an unheard-of haul. For the first time in living memory they have also seen dugong in the lagoon. I agree to come back in October to learn more and try to assist with funding or assistance for monitoring.

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Early morning, we take a banana boat to Atoifi in heavy rain, from where we commence our march. We are met at the wharf by Esau and a security contingent: young men, some sullen, armed with bows and arrows, bush knives, axes, and clubs. Such is the downpour that everything is soaked by the time the trail starts up a steep hill. The rain is unrelenting, the river swollen. I begin to wonder whether the ancestors want this reconciliation.

By midday I'm exhausted, but the road just keeps going up. Rain has forced us to take a long and very steep track. We avoid the worst river crossings, but a few are unavoidable, the most hazardous being a log bridge which is partially submerged in rapids. After that, it's just up, up, through mud, mud, mud, covering irregular limestone. Steep. Constant slips and falls.

The afternoon is already well advanced when Esau announces that the reconciliation ceremony cannot happen today. So we must spend the night in Kwainaa'isi Cultural Centre (a common area and keeping place for cultural material) without ritual protection.

Just before dark, we finally emerge out of the forest onto ridge. We cannot enter the Cultural Centre in our clothes, so in the rain we ditch our sodden garments and don a cane belt and leaf pubic cover — traditional male Kwaio attire. We walk into the cultural centre preceded by young men playing pan pipes.

I am greeted by Waneagea, who I last met in Sydney 8 months earlier, when he had attended a conservation planning meeting. He speaks little pidgin, but in the rain he shows me a tiny house, the door jamb no more than 1.2 metres high. Inside is a sleeping platform with a small blanket on it. Then, in bare feet, I slip and slide my way to a small room where we are served boiled taro, sweet potato, and "slippery cabbage," a hibiscus leaf with laxative properties.

Next morning, in pouring rain, we're off to an ancestral shrine deep in the forest, accompanied by senior men. We are told repeatedly that this is an extremely sacred ceremony. Rituals cannot be filmed or recorded — this is the realm of the ancestors. We go back up the ridgetop track, past our discarded clothes, and a kilometer or so later Esau stops at a small track leading down a steep slope to the left. The area is limestone karst and mossy forest. Tears well in Esau's eyes as he tells us that we will soon see the sacred cave where Basiana hid for months before giving himself up.

We enter a region of abrupt sinkholes, limestone boulders and gnarled, moss-covered trees. I am led by Waneagea, who wails as he approaches the cave entrance. Emotions are breaking out everywhere among the dozen or so Kwaio.

Several hundred meters upslope is a sinkhole where the bodies of murdered men and the bones of stolen pigs are disposed of. A few meters further on, I see three men through the pouring rain, standing under a crude shelter of leaves. It is ritual leader Diifaka, his brother and his son. I am put in the lead of our party, the others falling behind to leave a gap.

As I get closer I see that Diifaka is a shortish, muscular man with square face and the most startling eyes I've ever seen. His body is filled, almost stiff, with tension. He is Tabu: for 6 months he's not slept with his wife, eaten food cooked by a woman,

not entered a house. He is wearing a necklace strung with human teeth, from which hangs a crescent of pearl shell. He motions that I should stand outside the shelter, a few feet away from him. Everyone else stands some metres to my rear.

Diifaka's brother is holding a small black piglet, barely a week old. It is lying in his hand, atop 2 heart-shaped, leaves with purplish undersides. The creature is silent, but shivering violently from the cold. He hands the piglet to me and I clasp it to my chest, where my heartbeat and warmth calm it almost instantly.

After a few moments Diifaka motions to me to hand the piglet to him, but to keep the leaves in my hand. As I do so, he lets out a deep wail and recites a line in Kwaio I don't understand, except for the words "Australia," "England" and "Kwaio." He hands the pig to his son, who touches it on the head with a sop of leaves. The brother brushes it with a whisk, before handing it back to me. This is done 90 times, with different clan and individual names of ancestors inserted into the formula. As Diifaka recites one name, his face contorts with emotion and he bursts into tears. I hear other sobs behind me as other names are called out. After two hours standing in the rain, Diifaka asks if there are other names. A few people volunteer some, and when the names cease, the ceremony is almost at an end.

David later tells me two of the words used in each cycle: *kwaimanga*, meaning a deep loving relationship, and *gulanga*, meaning healing. The ceremony is bringing our peoples — our tribes — into a loving and respectful relationship. A foundation for trust and partnership.

Diifaka takes a bush-knife and divides a betel-nut into two. I am given half, which I chew, and Diifaka chews the other half. We are two halves of a whole — our tribes have had a violent history - but we are now chewing one betel nut as friends. Then, before we depart, the two leaves that held the pig are applied to the base of a whisk, and the back of each of us is brushed. The leaves that brushed the pig, calling each ancestral spirit in each cycle, now brush our bodies. The ancestral spirits now recognise us. Our generation can now continue as friends, as partners.

I follow Waneagea downslope. A rough sapling I'm holding to steady myself rips into the palm of my hand, leaving a gash diagonally across my hand. Waneagea abruptly turns, going back upslope and onto another path. Behind me, Diifaka tosses the piglet into the deep sinkhole. I hear nothing, though visions of the tiny thing haunt me for days. We see no more of Diifaka until we leave. He is still too filled with sacred power to mix.

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Morning brings mud up to the ankles, more taro and potato. The rain seems never to end, the ridge the cultural centre is on is wreathed perpetually in mist. But at midday we get a brief break in the weather and assemble in the mud. Waneagea and a second man stand there holding shell money, strung on a stick. Myself, David MacLaren and Tyrone Lavery line up opposite them, and each of us are handed a pig a week or two old. Esau explains in pidgin that the spirits of the warriors who gave themselves up and were hanged in Tulagi, need to be directly acknowledged. This exchange will publicly conciliate them. Esau tells me that my pig is for the spirit of Basiana.

A senior man named Laete'esafi, naked except for his cane belt, stands opposite me as I say "I give this pig for the Aola clan, and Basiana." After days of his perpetual spiritual presence, I find it hard to say his name: people often refer to Basiana by other terms. David then steps forward and gives his pig to another man, who accepts it for other clan members hung at Tulagi, and finally Tyrone steps forward, giving his pig to a third man, on behalf of yet a third clan.

Waneagea speaks in Kwaio, saying "I give you this for Mr Bell." He steps forward, giving me shell money. Another senior man, Agumae, steps forward, saying in Kwaio "I give you this for Mr Lillies," as he gives more shell money to David. As he speaks, cold, hard rain pours down, and we all run for shelter. The shell money is a public acknowledgement that Kwaio warriors killed Bell and Lillies, and a reciprocal exchange for the pigs that have just been offered for the ancestral spirits of Basiana and his men.

We return to an open hut where speeches are made. David, Tyrone and I speak on behalf of 'Australia', Esau leads off on behalf of Kwaio. More speeches follow. The last is given by a serious young man who swings a club as he orates. All eyes are riveted on him.

Then there's a huge release of energy as young man play the pipes while men, women and children all clap or dance in time, punctuated by speeches. Afterwards, more taro and sweet potato.

Only one man from Honiara has come up for the ceremony. Palmer is a mortuary attendant who is descended from all 3 lineages who lost members to the hangman at Tulagi. No politicians show up, despite the fact that senior politicians and bureaucrats have been officially invited — including Australia's Prime Minister for Reconciliation.

After dark we have a meeting about conservation. The men report that cats have been successfully suppressed in the three conservation areas: it's now hard to catch any, and camera monitoring isn't picking them up. As a result, there are far more frogs and lizards (especially the huge tree-skink *Corrucia zebrata*) than previously. Birds are also recovering at highest elevation site (near the cultural centre), where human hunting was affecting them.

Lakeno pudding, a traditional Kwaio dish made of taro and coconut, and made only for significant events, has been prepared by the mortician. I eat a square the size of my hand. It tastes delicious after the slippery cabbage. No meat has been eaten the entire time, due to a tabu associated with the pig-giving at the reconciliation ceremony.

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I pack, and give Waneagea my sleeping mat, sleeping bag, pillow and some cold tablets that help. He gives me a wai-susu bag made by his late wife, who was killed by a venomous snake two years earlier. After stand in the rain as everyone organizes themselves, then set off down slope. Its difficult going down over mud and rocks, and I slip and fracture a floating rib. My back goes into spasm, making it hard going.

After a few hours we come to a clearing. An old man sits in a shelter, waiting for us. He explains that he never married, has no children, and will die soon. 'No matter', he says. He gives David and I the most valuable of shell valuables, in thanks for our participation in the ceremony. As we depart, a Solomon Islands eagle soars overhead, flying in the direction we are about to take. The bird is the totem bird of Malaita: every eye is riveted on it. After more log bridges, swollen rivers and back spasms we arrive back at Atoifi exhausted beyond measure.

Atoifi airstrip is still shut by rain, so at dusk we take a banana boat back to Atori. Diifaka accompanies us. It's the first time I've seen him since ceremony. His face is changed, more relaxed. On the boat he sits facing the covered bow — he doesn't want to look at the sea. But the sea is glorious with luminescence. Then, in the deep water beyond the reef, darkness.

At Atori we wait for hours, but there is no truck to take us back across the island. Late at night a 3-tonne truck grinds in and we load up. It rains most of the way, and the road even worse than a few days earlier. David, his son Hamish, and Esau are in the back, with a tarp, but chilled by rain. We arrive Esau's house in Auki at 3:30am. It's still unfinished. I sleep on bare boards, with clothes in a plastic bag for a pillow. Wake up at 8:45am.

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11am. Over breakfast of fish and chips in Auki, David tells me that our contingent of security guards was made up of the worst criminals in all of Kwaio. The leader had killed an Australian in 2003 in anger at the injustice of British actions following the death of Bell. The man is often possessed by ancestral spirits. Esau had appointed the miscreants to give them responsibility. He knew this was a process of reform for us all, just as it was for them. As we were walking down the mountain, David looked back to see the murderer helping me over rocks with one hand, his axe in the other. In different circumstances ...

This was the serious young man who gave the speech while swinging his club just a few days earlier. He had been integral to the ritual in the ancestral shrine, and had participated in the healing process with the bunch of leaves brushed across his back. He observed the public exchange of pigs and shell money. Everybody else knew who he was, his history. They all knew the significance of his words. Now it was my turn to know his history.

David says the police were too scared to attend reconciliation. As a part of the modern nation state, they could not provide power, social harmony or facilitate peace and reconciliation. Nor could they provide control, so they stayed away.